Refugee Integration in Istanbul: Debunking Crisis Reporting

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ABSTRACT

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Syria's ongoing civil war has caused one of the largest migration movements in modern history. The United Nations estimates over 6 million of Syria's pre-war population is displaced and seeking refuge around the world. Turkey's liberal migration policies and shared border have made it a primary host country for Syrian refugees. Turkey now hosts nearly three million Syrians, with over 500,000 in Istanbul alone.

Refugee is a sour word. In the west, there are preconceptions: sad eyed children in camps and overflowing inflatable boats. Western media coverage of the crisis makes the pain of war palpable but doesn't hint at a future for the people involved. There is a long term reality that goes beyond gut reactions to the horrors of war. A new home for Syrians, Istanbul offers a new, often less graphic set of challenges and triumphs for Syrian integration. Without sufficient media coverage of integration, these details get overshadowed by stories of crisis. Through photographs and written narratives from Istanbul, this project documents refugee stories beyond crisis to show a critical and underreported side of Syria's diaspora.

This project has been a labor of love. And by that I mean the love I felt from so many people that willed it into fruition. Because I'm sentimental to the core, I'm going to list them all.

Thank you to...

Aysegul and Mehmet for helping me find my feet in Istanbul by welcoming me into your home.

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Mom and dad for giving me the world and never hiding its complexities.

Everyone who let me into their lives with a camera. You are brothers, sisters and friends.

Love to all.

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This work is dedicated to the resilient individuals starting new lives amid displacement. May your journeys lead to a place that feels like home.

Introduction

Researching for this project, I spent 7 months in Istanbul following the stories of Syrian refugees adapting to new lives in Istanbul. My photographs and written narratives highlight three themes that are lacking in Western news media's coverage of Syria's refugee crisis: immobility, permanence and innovation. Stories of immobility describe how lack of options for resettlement keeps many stuck in Turkey despite wanting to more on to Europe. Stories of permanence tell of long term implications for Syrians living in Istanbul without residency and innovation tells of Syrian individuals surpass these challenges through hard work and creativity.

Developing these themes, I will focus on how lack of visual coverage of integration leaves viewers unequipped to understand the situation for Syrians settling outside their country. I will first trace a timeline of Syria's domestic conflict and explain the legal situation for refugees in Turkey to demonstrate why Istanbul is an important case study for refugee integration. I will then describe my own experience documenting crisis to transition into written and visual narratives of Syrians collected in Istanbul. Through my work, I aim to show a more nuanced picture of integration that debunks the crisis focus of Western news media.

Western Media Portrayal of Syrian Refugees

The Syrian refugee crisis has been widely covered by Western news media since clashes between citizens and government prompted Syria's civil war in 2011. In the six years since, the crisis has become the subject of international attention in broadcast and print coverage as a humanitarian catastrophe with an estimated 6 million people seeking refuge around the world.[1]

Western media coverage has chronicled masses of humanity fleeing on boats and funneling through borders to describe a movement the scale of which hasn't existed since World War II. But while coverage has rightly portrayed the scope and seriousness of Syria's situation, the relentless crisis-oriented focus has left a void in which stories of refugees struggling to integrate into new societies are underreported. Following this trend, photographs of refugees fleeing from Syria put a face to crisis but have inadequately portrayed the subtler, long term consequences of forced displacement. The emphasis on crisis images distorts the complete story and negatively impacts public understanding about Syrian refugees.

Phillip Seib, professor of Journalism and Public Diplomacy and a Middle East expert at the University of Southern California said in an email interview: "The complexities of integration have been inadequately reported and analyzed." Although news media coverage differs between outlets and countries, integration coverage lacks the depth and resources necessary to effectively portray this part of the crisis. "The essence of the story – how refugees enter into and affect their new communities – tends to suffer from oversimplification," Seib said.

[1] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "5,031,622." *UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response*. United Nations. May 09 2017.

Often the first entry point into a story, photographs of refugees play a distinct role in reinforcing the news media's dominant crisis focus. Shocking images like press photographer Nilufer Demir's photograph of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi who drowned when his boat to Europe capsized off the coast of Turkey in August 2015 put tragedy directly in front of the viewer. The mass reproduction of photographs conveying messages of suffering have come to represent the refugee plight for many Western viewers. Bryan Denton, an American freelance photojournalist who covered the exodus from Syria in 2015, said this shock value gives images an especially significant role in reporting crisis. "Photography, more than any other medium, has the capacity to become profoundly iconic.... Photojournalism is not only about history, but for many people it becomes a sort of collective memory," he said.

In 2016, Syria's tragedies gained recognition in the prestigious World Press Photo Awards as the most noteworthy images from around the world. The first prize in the spot news category went to Warren Richardson's photo of a Syrian baby being passed through a barbed wire fence across the border from Serbia to Hungary. The contest also awarded three out of four of its top news prizes to Samee al-Doumy, Mauricio Lima and Serge Ponomorev covering bloody atrocities in Syria and refugees fleeing across the sea. Spot news photographs documenting the mass exodus are heralded as prize worthy pieces of history yet scenes of refugees integrating into new environments outside their country do not attract the same attention.

In a 2015 report, "Moving Stories: International Review of How Media Covers Migration," the Ethical Journalism Network, an international network of journalists promoting education on ethics and human rights in journalism, analyzed the quality of media coverage of 14

countries around the world associated with mass migration movements. The report highlights the theme of refugees pictured fleeing Syria since 2011: "In most countries the story has been dominated by two themes – numbers and emotions."[2] Another report published in December 2016 by the UNHCR highlights these media priorities in a survey about press coverage of the refugee and migrants in five European countries. The report found that integration stories accounted for less than 20 percent of media coverage in Germany, Sweden, Italy and the UK and only 2.6 percent of articles in the UK press.[3]

As crisis photographs build a Western collective memory, they also influence both public and political discussion. In the United States, the Ethical Journalism Network criticized American news media coverage of refugees that focused on political rhetoric surrounding crisis, which allowed anti-refugee sentiment to gain traction. Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma and a Syria expert said the voices of refugees are often overpowered by more shocking news about Syria, "There's been a building crescendo of anti-Islamic coverage…they're drowned out by this larger story of ISIS and Muslim intolerance," Landis said. With the rise of Islamophobia and targeted attacks of terrorist organizations in Europe, the resistance toward refugees remains culturally ingrained giving news outlets little impetus to focus on integration. The structure and politics of the media industry makes it difficult for these stories to gain traction

A report by the International Center for Migration Policy Development, an international organization that deals with issues around migration, surveyed media coverage on migration in

[2] Ethical Journalism Network. "Moving Stories - International Review of How Media Cover Migration." Scribd. 2015..

[3] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU: A Content Analysis of Five European Countries." UNHCR. December 2015.

17 countries between 2015 and 2016. Among themes found in the study, the report highlights the media's structural bias towards crisis one of the barriers to accurate coverage of the refugee crisis: "Undue political influence, self-censorship inside newsrooms and the prevailing lack of resources hampers the preparation of in-depth, well researched editorial needed for reporting in context."[4] While some news organizations have covered integration, Philip Seib said most outlets focus their resources elsewhere. "There is limited incentive for news organizations to provide nuanced coverage since they believe – probably accurately – that much of their audience doesn't really care about the refugees' plight," he said. As a result, empathy for refugees is lost to fear and misconceptions that politics and propaganda help shape.

With a noticeable glut in coverage about Syrian integration, crisis images saturate the media landscape and gradually create a sense of separation between the people photographed and the Western viewer. Phillip Seib said some of the disinterest in covering integration stems from a lens of inequality to which we've grown accustomed. "Americans are vaguely sympathetic but not ready to become refugees' advocates... I think the concept of "America first" is deep-rooted and is reflected in attitudes about the refugee crisis," Seib said. With an emphasis on images of suffering, the stories of the refugees pictured lose persuasive power. "The effects of powerful images, such as those of dead children, are transient. I don't know that they have had lasting effect," Seib said.

As Syria's war rages on with no foreseeable end in sight, the situation for refugees is ever-changing. Syrians continue to flee their country, facing risky border crossings, perilous sea journeys and pervasive uncertainties that Western viewers have come to associate with a refugee

[4] Ethical Journalism Network. ""How Does the Media on Both Sides of the Mediterranean Cover Migration?"." International Centre for Migration Policy Development. May 2, 2017. Web.

crisis. Yet while these events unfold, examples of integration subtly proceed around the world. Just as photography has the unique power to reinforce graphic stories of suffering, visuals more than words can disrupt, corrupt and add depth to the ways in which the Syrian refugee crisis is reported and photographed.

Roots of Syria's Revolution

The roots of Syria's refugee crisis involve a complex history of political, social and economic factors culminating in revolution. In March 2011, peaceful protests against the government of Syria's president Bashar al-Assad started in the city of Daraa sending ripples of unrest across Syria. Influenced by the Arab Spring in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen, Syria's public began to turn against Assad resulting in a popular protest movement calling for an end to the Assad regime.

The government's response was one of brutal retaliation—stifling their voices with army fire. Unrest coupled with government strongman policies fueled a public ripe for revolution. As protests spread throughout the country, the Syrian government continued to crackdown against dissenters with violence and imprisonment. By May of 2011, army tanks were facing down activists in the streets. The Free Syrian Army emerged as an insurgency group to counter the the government's abusive control inciting more violence as the group began to seize government military bases. By January 2012, conflict in Syria had escalated into a full-blown civil war.

In the following years, foreign actors became involved in Syria's conflict both directly and indirectly. In 2014, Daesh, the Arabic title for the Islamic State, and other rebel groups joined the fight against Assad for control in Syria. That same year, the United States became

involved in Syria with a coalition of other NATO states to challenge Daesh inroads. Kurdish rebel groups fought government forces in the north and Al-Nusra, a branch of Al-Qaeda in Syria also entered the fight to counter Assad's regime and Daesh control. Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey became major actors in conflict and the European Union was also tied to the outcome in Syria through immigration policies and humanitarian support. Today, as competing groups fight against the Assad regime for control of Syria, violence fuels mass destruction around the country. Syria's war continues to be the subject of international discussion over the use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons while citizens of Syria cities adapt to the consequences of their war-torn country.

Just as Syria's war is a multinational affair, the refugee movement has become a matter of international attention. Syria's refugees have challenged the framework for international protection and left the world unsure how to respond. Countries bordering Syria absorbed the largest influx of refugees with nearly five million or 80 percent, landing in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. According to the UNHCR, Turkey has shouldered the main burden, taking in nearly 3 million refugees in the past six years.[5] Turkey's refugees have fallen into lives of social and legal ambiguity as the duration of life outside their country remains uncertain. As the first step for many refugees outside their country, Turkey is an important country in which to examine the social and cultural implications of the Syrian diaspora.

[5] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "Syria Regional Refugee Response." UNHCR . May 1, 2017. Web.

Syrian Migration to Turkey

In the first years of the conflict, Turkey adopted an "open door policy" which allowed refugees to enter the country legally without restrictions. With only 10 percent of refugees living in camps in Turkey, most Syrians have since settled in urban areas around the country. Although this population is in constant flux, a January 2017 report from the Marmara Municipalities Union recorded a current population of 540,000 in Istanbul alone.[6]

Under the 1951 Geneva Convention, an international conference on refugees, Turkey is not required to grant refugee status to Syrians. Under this policy, the government maintains that only people fleeing from Europe are legally eligible for asylum. Because migration occurred on a large scale when war in Syria began, Turkey did not have a clear system for processing asylum requests.

The Turkish government attempted to re-address the issue in 2013 through a policy from the Turkish Law on Foreigners and International Protection that allows the government to grant temporary protection to those who enter the country en masse.[7] According to the United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, asylum guarantees migrants a set of rights including provisions for health care and education.[8] However, with Turkey's recent provisions, the country grants temporary protection but does not ensure citizenship or free movement outside

[6] Erdogan, M. Murat, Dr. "Urban Refugees from "Detachment" to "Harmonization"." Marmara Municipalities Union's Center for Urban Policies . January 2017.
[7] Johnson, Constance. "Turkey: New Law on Foreigners and International Protection ." US Library of Congress. April 18, 2013.
[8] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees." UNHCR. July 1951.

the country. As a result, refugees in Istanbul are legally seen as guests with few viable routes for resettlement outside of Turkey.

In the early years of crisis, many Syrians chose to continued on to Europe by crossing the Aegean Sea from Turkey's coast. However, an agreement between the EU and Turkey in March 2016 restricted travel to Europe by closing coastal borders to those arriving by boat. For many Syrians that hoped to travel on to Europe, options are increasingly limited and staying in Turkey is their only option.

Caught in limbo as neither citizens nor guests, Syrians in Istanbul must adapt to survive. Despite the limited amount of support that Syrians are currently provided, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan outlined a plan in the Summer of 2016 to allow those who pass government screenings to apply for citizenship. In March 2017, Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Veysi Kaynak said in a statement that between 20,000 and 22,000 Syrian families have qualified. [9] Ali Zafer Sagiroglu, a Turkish sociologist and migration expert at Oxford university, was one of the experts who suggested naturalization in Turkey as the only possible long term options for Syrians. With increasingly strict immigration policies around the world, Sagiroglu said Turkey is adjust to the reality that many Syrian refugees will likely remain. "They will not return, they will not be sent to other countries. These people will live in Turkey," he said in an interview.

While covering only a small proportion of the total number of Syrians living in Turkey, the move towards naturalization signals long term acceptance by the Turkish government. With continued uncertainty in Syria, the experiences of refugees in Istanbul give a taste of the multifaceted face of integration for Syrians living outside their country.

[9] Syrian Observer. "20,000 Syrian Families Eligible for Turkish Citizenship: Deputy PM." The. March 27, 2017.

Reporting Crisis

"Istanbul has more Syrian refugees than all of Europe," a headline from Turkey's Hurriyet Newspaper proclaimed as I sat reading in an Austin coffee shop in December 2015. I'd seen crisis photos in my classes and on the news, dominated by overcrowded boats and sad-eyed children. But this statement was especially striking. It conjured up grandiose images of cultures colliding under the turrets of Istanbul's skyline. I was intrigued from a sociological perspective. I wanted to know how Syrian refugees were influencing the city.

Arriving in Istanbul a month later, I hit the ground running with an intuition that I felt was my own. I soon found my interest was far from unique. "For every Syrian family living in Istanbul there are five researchers, four journalists, and three filmmakers here to study them," I was told during my first week in the city. The "Syrian refugee" has become a kind of cultural phenomenon. By focusing on this issue, I became part of a different kind of phenomenon: a growing trend of Westerners coming to Istanbul to study Syria's refugees.

It took me a while to come to terms with this. In the beginning, I felt guilty. My vague research interest and half-baked ambition to start a photo project turned into feelings of intense hesitation. I tiptoed around the idea out of fear that my motives would be misinterpreted. I spent months feeling bashful about my role as an outsider naively trying to record a piece of something much too large to wrap in a neat little package. I did not want to oversimplify their situation or undermine the voices of the people I met by inserting my own when telling their stories.

As I struggled to find direction, I made it my goal to first understand the situation for refugees from many sides including work, housing, documentation and social adaptation. In my

mind, I began to write a mental map of what parts of the situation I felt were vital to show. Slowly I started to photograph. Sometimes the characters came to me organically like when I met Omer, a young guitarist playing spiritedly in a café and saw Orouba, a community leader speaking with palpable intensity at a neighborhood meeting. I could sense their role distinctly with a calm certainty in my gut. Other times, I felt exhausted as I navigated spaces where I felt invasive and uncertain as I tried to determine my role as a documentarian.

This feeling came to a head one afternoon just down the street from my house in Balat where I'd planned an interview for the day with my Syrian friend Khalid. Walking up the stairs, hijab covered heads peaked through the doorways before quickly pulling back inside. I entered the dark little upstairs room shyly and smiled the smile that I'd learned for six months surrounded by foreign language, using body language to fill the void.

I touched the arm of the grandmother in the family and practiced my minimal Arabic "kifik?" -- How are you? I asked. "Alhamdulillah," --Thanks be to God, she responded. The family of seven living inside the house were refugees from Aleppo. I passed by the house every day walking down the street to buy bread for my breakfast. They were all women except for the young boy that always greeted me outside my home with his practiced phrase "bir lira" --asking tourists for the coins jingling in their pockets.

Khalid had agreed to be my translator for the afternoon and, with him to my right, I took a spot on a cushion in the living room with my camera poised for whatever ensued. Listening to Khalid translate my questions, all I felt was emptiness. Their stories were raw. Their house was bombed. They lived without a father and husband. They were stranded in the city without language or the means to support themselves. I'd read their story in the newspaper a hundred

times. Now sitting in the family's living room, I pictured myself sitting back in an Austin coffee shop writing a story their story. It felt all wrong.

Was I contributing to the stereotypes about refugees that I wanted to dispel? I was hyper aware of the privilege of my nationality. I could feel their wariness with every move that I made. I knew this family's story was honest but leaving the house I couldn't help but feel like I was doing something wrong by covering it. I didn't know anything about them other than this hour in which my job was to record their story of suffering. I could feel the conflicting pangs of reporting about crisis even while I was doing it. All I could do was make eye-contact, smile and hope they could trust my humanity.

I knew this wasn't the story I wanted to write and proceeded to focus on presenting a larger view. With the freedom to build the project on my own, I could do this. Acting without the pressure of a publication, I had autonomy to decide what messages I wanted to get across. Most importantly, I had time to learn, plan, fail, panic and finally execute.

But this is not the norm. In the resource desert that is photojournalism, time is a luxury and financial backing a constant stress. This project allowed me the freedom to cover the story without having to survive financially as a working photojournalist. Because of this, I was able to devote my time to working on a long term project, something that many freelancers don't have the luxury of doing. I had ample time to identify notable gaps that I feel are important to highlight in refugee coverage and share them through my work.

Working on this project, I became witness to one small period in the history of people's lives and their influence on the city. I was allowed to be part of this uncertain and difficult but historic moment in people's lives. Although some appear stuck for now, these situations are not

permanent but images of transition. I didn't want to make images that evoke pity. I didn't want to perpetuate stories of suffering or reinforce the image of refugees as victims--less humanitarianism and more humanity. Humanity is something I can share.

Integration in Photos

As a complement to written journalism, photographs give the public an unabashed look into foreign realities that allow them to directly connect with the subject matter. In the early days of documentary photography, covering crisis was an exercise in revealing truths to inform and educate. As one of the primary journalists documenting Europe's refugee crisis after World War II, Magnum photographer David Seymour understood the responsibility of covering displaced children in his book *Children of War* published by UNESCO in 1949.

With few other people covering the crisis, Seymour's photos came to symbolize the graphic struggles of refugees that otherwise would not have reached the public. A self described humanist and staunch pacifist, Seymour outlines his goals as a documentarian to record the situation unstaged: "We've got to tell it now, let the news in, show the hungry face, the broken land, anything so that those who are comfortable may be moved a little."[10]

Since Seymour's time, the scale and publicity of crisis coverage has increased drastically, changing how images are received by the public. Phillip Seib describes how mass media attention may shift from eliciting empathy from the public to highlighting differences. "Inherent in all this is a form of what Edward Said called "othering": these people are not "us," and

[10] Seymour, David. *Children of Europe*. UNESCO, 1949. Print.

therefore we can treat them and their problems as safely remote," Seib said. This othering is not only intensified but deeply ingrained in the ways stories about refugees are told. Jason Brownlee, a professor from the Department of Middle Eastern Studies at UT, said this echoes a larger theme within U.S. media coverage of the Middle East. "I think there is a general problem of not having a good sense of what the other is…. Especially when the other is considered the enemy. " Brownlee said.

Susan Sontag, a writer renowned for her critique of war photography, explicitly states this idea within her discussion of the ethics of war photography. Sontag describes this conflict in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*: "Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers…. If one feels that there is nothing 'we' can do -- but who is that 'we'? -- and nothing 'they' can do either -- and who are 'they' -- then one starts to get bored, cynical, apathetic."[11] In an attempt to procure empathy, do these photos inhibit the viewer from feeling anything at all? When reporting stories of suffering, can emphasis on one side of truth undermine the stories growing in the wings?

The ritual of documentation occupies an increasingly unquestioned space in the modern world. Images can act as a barrier or entry point into unknown situations making the medium essential for education. Martha Rosler's *In, Around, and Afterthoughts on Documentary Photography* describes how documentary photography can risk becoming an act of imposed hierarchies. "Documentary, as we know it, carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful."[12] These hierarchies dictates how the

[11] Sontag, Susan. Regarding the Pain of Others. London: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.

[12] Rosler, Martha. *In, Around, and Afterthoughts on Documentary Photography*. Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings 1975-2001. Web.

public participates in image viewing and how photographs can easily create caricatures of the people depicted.

In her speech "Porous Sovereignty, Walled Democracy" Wendy Brown, Professor of Political Science at the University of California describes how the modern information age entrenches boundaries between groups of people that can be reinforced through news media. She describes modern nation states as, "a haphazard landscape of flows and barriers" that dictate how we receive and process information from the outside.[13] The role of documentarians as gatekeepers for public understanding can further reinforces the social stratifications that alienate subjects from the public.

Situated in a sticky corner as messengers, journalists have the power to distort the picture, often as a pressure of the media landscape to produce content that sells. Because of the rapid growth of the news media's reach, there is a greater danger in proliferation of sensationalized stories that depict but do not accurately portray the full story for refugees that are settling in cities such as Istanbul. Oversaturated by refugee coverage with undertones of "otherness," there's little room for equality.

By neglecting to cover this piece of the refugee situation in depth, news media misses important human pieces of the refugee experience. Refugee stories that continue to confront the public with tragedy and destruction may be lost already in the robust collective memory that Syrian refugee crisis photos have already created. Having covered crisis across the Middle East, Bryan Denton has experienced the challenges as a freelance journalist photographing long-lasting conflicts for the New York Times, TIME and Stern among others. "The difficulty is

[13] Dean, Jodi. *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy*. Cornell Press, 2002. Print.

compassion fatigue. The crisis has been ongoing for years now and people reading the news have become desensitized to the human misery associated with the crisis," he said in an email.

In this context, photographs are the most important tool for non-crisis understanding because they can humanize and debunk preconceptions about the lifestyles of refugee. As a result, journalism must adapt its focus to ensure that crisis coverage does not overpower the subtler details that are necessary to fully understand the situation. Photographers can either construct or help dismantle social stratifications through their image making process.

Voices of Syrians themselves, coupled with photographs from my project, describe how refugees' experiences sometimes coincide with crisis narratives but often defy these assumptions. Integration narratives sometimes speak about crisis but their diversity of coverage paints a more well-rounded picture of how Syrians are rebuilding their lives for a long-term future outside of their native country.

Conclusion

Covering matters of refugee integration is a necessary and underrepresented side of the true Syrian immigration crisis that deserves greater attention within the news media. Photography has a special role to play in unearthing such stories. In the same ways crisis photos become iconic, photographs can persuade the public to reevaluate preconceptions and understand the situation outside a lens of pity.

Beyond the "it bleeds it leads" trope, the news media's focus can have real consequences for the ways in which refugees are understood and accepted in countries outside of Syria. Because of the inextricable nature of media, research and policy, successful reporting should not

only challenge stereotypes but also the ways in which governments and international organizations respond to refugees. The Syrian refugee crisis is becoming a widespread diaspora with cultural consequences that will have lasting effects. Focusing only on the conventional aspects of "crisis" distorts the picture of what's truly involved.

I write this now as both a humbled skeptic and hopeless idealist. I'm skeptical of the power to change perceptions that have been drilled deep by thematic coverage but deeply humbled by own experience interacting with the individuals featured in this project. Much more than an independent undertaking, it became a collaboration between cultures working together to understand one another. In executing a project on a topic that has been widely and fiercely covered, I am aware more than ever that my work is a drop in the ocean. To think that it counters dominant pictures of crisis that we've been seeing for the past six years is impossible. However, my belief in the power of the image to educate and reinforce equality across borders is forever instilled through my experience in Istanbul.

The following set of features collected between April and July 2016 tell the stories of Syrian individuals living in Istanbul and their unique challenges and triumphs in integration. In creating this project, I hope others can get a better taste for the resilience, creativity and individuality of the people photographed and connect with the humanity that connects us.

Immobility

It's 10:00 PM and Nejla and Maya stand in their Istanbul bedroom clad in neon workout gear with a laptop open in front of them. A YouTube video shows a peppy yoga instructor and a posse of students behind her. The girls follow along with purpose as the teacher guides the virtual audience through each pose.

Since they left their home in Syria, this routine isn't just a hobby for the Maya and Nejla—it's sanity. It's how they have learned to fill their time as refugees—a period that has now dominated a large part of their young lives. Lives of immobility. Shut in their room, if they're not watching yoga, they're practicing kick-boxing—more cardio if they're in the mood. Maya wipes the sweat from her forehead and opens the window to Istanbul's orange light.

Nejla, 13, lived in Istanbul eight months with her father waiting for word from the Swedish embassy about reuniting with her mother and little sister in Europe. Not enrolled in school, she fills her time watching YouTube videos and connecting with Swedish people on social media in anticipation of a new beginning in Europe.

The same light shines into the temporary homes of other displaced people around the city. It drifts in through windows as the sound of late night WhatsApp and FaceTime conversations drift out—the virtual threads connecting Syrians separated by war's forced diaspora. The nuances of their experiences are embedded in these snippets of phone messages and details on computer screens. These small mercies of technology help give order to lives disrupted and caught in stasis.

Maya and Nejla said nightly YouTube sessions help distract them from uncertainty. The girls are 13 and 15. They were in primary school when their family left their home in Damascus. In the four years since then, YouTube lessons on their laptop have come to substitute for being back in the classroom. They have been stuck in Istanbul for nearly a year while applying for reunification with their mother in Sweden. They wait without a timeline.

These feelings of uncertainty are not uncommon for many of the other 400,000 Syrian refugees living in Istanbul. Coming from Syria, many hoped to move west as quickly as possible—stories of free housing in countries like Germany and Sweden more enticing than life without government support in Turkey. Since the beginning of Syria's civil war in 2011, Turkey's western coast has become a transit point for those attempting to travel without government-sanctioned ways to Europe.

Ahmed, his wife and two daughters fled together from Syria to Istanbul, a rare experience as many families remain separated. They now live in Bursa, outside of Istanbul but hope to travel to Germany. With limited options for resettlement, for now they have no choice but to remain in Turkey

The trip from Turkey to Europe by sea is costly and unpredictable—something Mohammad knows all too well. Since coming to Turkey, Mohammad said he has become part of the smuggling network responsible for organizing transport of refugees to Europe. Sitting at a café in Istanbul, he checks his iPhone obsessively with one hand while sipping Turkish coffee shakily

with the other. His job in the smuggler chain is coordinating—calling, texting and organizing payment for travel: around $1,000 per person.

Although the price tag for a future in Europe is hard to swallow, it's all part of the business, "Everybody knows the price. It's routine. People trust me," Mohammad said. The job itself has its risks, once landing Mohammad in Turkish prison for six months, but it's nothing compared to the gamble for refugees to get a spot on a smuggler's inflatable boat. Traveling illegally is a tricky proposition. It requires many to pay for a fake passport and entrust money to smugglers at the risk of being cheated—not to mention losing their lives.

Smuggling isn't something Mohammad planned on doing. He worked for the Zara retail store in Syria but in Turkey, like many, he found himself jobless and desperate. When offered money to help smuggle, he jumped at the opportunity, and has never had a shortage of customers. The International Organization of Migration estimates that over 350,000 migrants entered Europe by sea in 2016.[14] For many, possibilities across the Mediterranean represent a shining alternative to the challenges of life in Turkey.

Nina, 16, waited in two years in Istanbul with her mother and sisters while applying through the United Nations for resettlement to the US. After many rounds of interviews, the family finally received approval for resettlement. This is rare experience out of the many who apply.

[14] International Organization of Migration. "Missing Migrants Project." Missing Migrants Project. December 23, 2016. Accessed May 09, 2017.

However, an agreement between the European Union and Turkey in March 2016 has made traveling to Europe even more difficult[15]. The agreement attempts to stem the flow of migrants from Turkey to Greece by sending illegal arrivals back to Turkey. In exchange, the EU vowed to increase resettlement of refugees already living in Turkey, but without creating incentives for those people to stay. The deal also promises avenues for Turkish nationals to get visas into the EU, an added incentive for Turkey as it continues to vie for EU membership.

Abdullazeez, center left, shares Iftar with Syrian housemates while he rests for a night in Istanbul. Leaving Syria nine months ago, he spent $500 and over nine hours at sea to make it to Sweden. He was granted refugee status in Sweden and now travels back through Turkey to retrieve his family and bring them legally to Europe.

This deal puts pressure on Turkey's already overwhelmed infrastructure, while European leaders like German Chancellor Angela Merkel benefit politically from the drastic decrease in arrivals. Turkey nearly three million Syrian refugees, having become a practical holding center for a growing population of displaced people. With terror attacks and domestic instability in Turkey on the rise, the agreement is not only politically but also legally questionable—skating international laws on refugee protection. Amnesty International calls the deal a "historic blow to rights," as refugees are immobilized by the EU's migration policies.[16] And it doesn't change the reality: People will continue to travel to Europe.

[15] Council of the European Union. "Statement of the EU Heads of State or Government."March 7, 2016. Web.
[16] Amnesty International."EU-Turkey refugee deal a historic blow to rights." March 18, 2016. Web.

Rather than limiting the work of smugglers, Mohammad said, the deal has only made them change their routes. In the summer of 2016 smugglers sent boats to Italy instead of Greece, a longer and likely more dangerous trip. Mohammad said his trips have consistently been successful, but that's not always the case. The IOM also estimates that nearly 5,000 refugees died making the trip by sea in 2016 alone. That toll is up from previous years, averaging 14 deaths at sea per day. The route represents one of the most perilous elements of the refugee crisis, and the demand isn't going away. "People need me," Mohammad said.

Although Mohammad's work is controversial, some feel that paying smugglers is their best hope. A Syrian passport gives few other legal alternatives. Beyond documentation that would allow short-term travel for Syrians outside the country, long-term options are limited to the capacity of a few organizations that struggle to process the extreme demand. Leaving Turkey requires approval from another country and since the war has escalated, all but a few countries now deny Syrians visas.

Shams was pregnant with Abdullah when she came to Turkey while her husband travelled to Germany to apply for refugee status. FaceTime calls with Abdullah's aunt and father in Germany are the only form of communication he knows while his parents try to gather the resources for reunification.

As Syria's neighboring countries shoulder a disproportionate load left by the EU, those who really suffer are the displaced individuals caught in the middle of the politics. For those refugees already in Turkey, the agreement offers few viable options, even for those living in desperation. This pushes many Syrians to make the dangerous trip across the sea as a last resort. Some

families succeed, some fail, and others like Wafaa's are scattered. Staying connected is now a transcontinental process.

The only time Wafaa's family is together is during their nightly WhatsApp calls after her sister gets home from work. Breaking the evening lull, the house comes alive with the voices of family members in Germany and Syria. Wafaa and her family used to live together in Damascus but when violence in Syria escalated, they decided it was time to get out. Wafaa's father stayed in Damascus while her brother and sister successfully travelled to Germany. Wafaa and the others tried to organize a trip to meet them in Germany but ended up stranded on Turkey's coast. Now they're stuck in Istanbul.

As they gather in the living room around cups of dark amber Turkish tea, Wafaa's father tells them about high food prices and electricity cuts back home. Her sister talks about learning German and settling into a new apartment. In Istanbul, Wafaa tries to learn Turkish and searches for ways to get the rest of her family to Germany. Unless she applies for resettlement through the United Nations, an arduous and unpredictable process, options are slim.

Nightly WhatsApp calls are a slice of normality for Wafaa and her family. These virtual connections are the only thing her nephew Abduallah knows of his extended family. His earliest memories of his father are images on a screen and his only conception of Syria consists of the few photos in the kitchen where he sleeps. Part of a new generation born into this crisis, Abdullah entered the world as a refugee after his mother Shams came to Istanbul while pregnant. Abduallah sleeps on a pile of blankets in the corner while Shams holds the phone camera up in view of his aunt and father.

Maya and Nejla are old enough to remember Syria. In their room they point out the few things they brought with them when they left home in Damascus. But these images have slowly faded in the transition they have been living since. For a long time, Maya and Nejla said this frustration turned into depression. They use technology to help move beyond the past, scrolling through Instagram fitness accounts on their bright phone screens.

In the bedroom next door, another laptop screen glows. The voice of the girls' mother Hasnaa comes through a Skype conversation with their father Mazin and brother Tarik. Hasnaa traveled by boat from Turkey with her three-year-old daughter, Sham in tow. Mazin recalls the conversation when Hasnaa told him she wanted to make the trip to Europe. She could not wait around longer. With few legal options for resettlement, travelling to Europe by sea was the only option for a future in Sweden.

Ali, Hasnaa and Mazin's nephew, crossed the Syrian border on foot after fleeing his home in Aleppo. "War isn't the actual shooting or the battle, it's the aftermath," Ali says. After coming to Turkey, he tried to travel to Germany with his aunt and cousin but now remains in Istanbul. He continues to seek options for travel to Europe.

For Noor*, another young Syrian stranded in Istanbul, the promise of life in Europe once pushed her to attempt the same dangerous journey. Now she's surrounded by a group of young Syrian friends who have since settled in Istanbul. But she says staying is not something she would have chosen for herself. Noor left Syria with her family with the intention of leaving Turkey right away. She says she planned to staying in Turkey only long enough to coordinate with a smuggler, collect enough money and move on.

Noor calmly recalls the many attempts and $10,000 she and her family paid smugglers to coordinate the trip. The process was far from scientific and ended up much more like a nightmare. She describes being crammed in the back of trucks and taken through the night by smugglers who later threatened her family at gunpoint.

Noor's family was ready to give up when another smuggler put the family in a small dinghy and told them to paddle themselves to Greece. When she arrived on the shore, Batool says the Greek police threw her family's belongings in the water and sent them back to Turkey. She still wishes she could have made it to Europe, but now, drained of money from paying by smugglers, staying in Turkey is now her best option. After so many failed attempts, she won't risk trying again.

Meanwhile, Mazin tries hard to forget the trauma of his wife's first failed attempt to travel to Europe that Mazin tries hard to forget. In an overcrowded rubber boat, Hasnaa left with her nephew Ali and Sham from the coastal city of Izmir. When the other passengers in their boat saw the coast guard in the distance, they panicked. Their boat popped, sending Ali, Hasnaa and Sham into the freezing water. After Sham recovered in the hospital and soon after, Hasnaa and her daughter made another attempt—this one successful.

Mazin had begged his wife not to try again after hearing of his daughter's near death experience. "Sometimes I'm crying when I'm imagining the pictures, really I'm crying," he said. After boarding a boat with her daughter for a second time, Hasnaa's gamble paid off. She registered as a refugee in Sweden and applied for reunification to bring the rest of her family to Europe. Meanwhile in Istanbul, Mazin and his children wait.

But uncertainty is nothing new for Maya and Nejla. They now look ahead to a new life in Europe. They only wish it could have happened sooner. Maya said she envies her little sister who won't grow up with the same uncertainty. "If you ask her 'Where are you from?' she'll tell you, 'I'm Swedish,'" Mazin said. "She doesn't know anything about Syria."

Mazin and his family in their dining room in Istanbul. Their suitcases remained unpacked after eight months in hope they'd soon get approved to travel to Europe. "[It's] like they are sitting in a prison," Mazin said of the years his children spent waiting.

The girls laugh as they watch Sham twirl on the screen behind Hasnaa wearing a frilly pink tiara before saying goodbye to their mother and little sister. The family sits together on the bed, ending their day like many others: in front of a computer screen. It was on the same screen they use to watch workout videos for hours each day where they finally got saw their approval to travel to Sweden. Four years after leaving Syria, the family settles into a life of uncharacteristic stability.

For families in the same situation as Wafaa's in Istanbul, many days still feel like a waiting game. Some are like Noor—accepting Istanbul as their new normal, while and still many others may choose to risk it all for the image possibility of different new start in Europe. Meanwhile, technology helps fill the vacuum left by forced separation. FaceTime calls replace family dinners and virtual bedtime kisses are a substitute for the real thing. These are experiences of people caught in a system in which mobility is not a personal choice. Part of a forced diaspora, they are adapting to the reality of this new normal—stuck until the system allows for change.

*Name has been changed upon request to protect identity

No Longer Temporary

From the street, it's like any other Istanbul scene. Elderly Turkish men sit in the corner café with smoke swirling around them, playing cards with resolute seriousness. Women pop their heads out of open second floor windows to shake rugs, dust falling gently into the street below. Children on bicycles weave between siblings coming from the market with bags overflowing with produce for the week.

But beyond the sliding metal door at the end of the street there's a distinctly different mood. Bunk beds line the walls of four rooms separated by corrugated metal dividers. Clothes hang to dry above a couch in a dimly lit garage that around twenty Syrian men call home. Although the residents come from different cities in Syria, in Istanbul they face the same reality: the possibility of temporary conditions lasting long term.

Limited space and expensive rent requires innovative housing for refugees in Istanbul. This lead Ali Baker to open a hostel for Syrian men when he came to Turkey from Aleppo. Many of the young men in Ali's house came to Istanbul without their families, making communal housing their best option.

In the corner sits Ali—the landlord and older brother figure for the young group living in the house. He started the hostel style home when he came to Istanbul and realized the difficulty men who've fled Syria alone have in find housing. With overcrowding and expensive rent, Istanbul requires resourcefulness for newly arrived refugees. But for many of the men that have spent months living in Ali's hostel, a larger question is how to survive in Istanbul long term.

This experience is shared by a mass of Syrians who entered Istanbul since refugees began to flee violence in Syria six years ago. In the first years of Syria's civil war, Turkey maintained its position from the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention to deny entry to non-European refugees. The 1951 Convention, defines a refugee as "[Someone] who, not having nationality and being outside of the country of his nationality or being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

Because of Turkey's restrictions at the beginning of the war, Syrians did legally apply to be refugees through this international framework. However, Turkey's 2013 Law on Foreigners and Refugee Protection amended this policy to grant Syrian refugees temporary protection. The conditions of this decision do not stipulate a time limit and Turkey's president Recep Tayyip Erdogan initially welcomed Syrians as "Misafir" or guests under the assumption that their stay would be temporary.

Orouba has been an activist since her university days organizing protests. She was banned from working in Syria because of her family's anti-government history but still feels strong ties to her homeland. In Istanbul, she is the leader of a Syrian advocate group promoting refugee rights and integration.

Within the Turkish legal system Syrians are not granted full rights of refugees nor treated as permanent citizens. The "Misafir" outlook is becoming inconsistent with the reality that many living in the city will likely remain long term. With continued volatility, including President Bashar Al-Assad's chemical weapon attack against Syrian citizens that killed 89 people in April,

the possibility for returning refugees to Syria would directly violate the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.[17] Treated as a temporary legal fixture in Turkey, refugees exist in a semi-stateless limbo. They're bound by the limits of their nationality.

Turkey's legal system is a constantly changing morass where refugees are concerned, leaving millions unable to register for asylum. Although the system outwardly adapted to the needs of Syrians in the first years, many soon learned that the government's policies were inconsistent at best. A 25-year-old Syrian named Rusty experienced this when he came from Damascus during the same year the system was adopted. In the beginning, Rusty he said registering as a refugees was easy; it required paying $65 in fees and waiting from around 2-3 months for his papers.

Rusty first came to Istanbul from Syria to escape mandatory military service in 2013—something that would have required him to fight against the rebel army groups he supported. In Syria, he dated his girlfriend Sana secretly because her conservative parents forbade their relationship. Sana talks about her relationship living with her judgmental and abusive father. "You are a zero to me," Sana recalled him saying. Four months after Rusty left Damascus, Sana ran away from her family to join him. After their extremely restricted life in Syria, they hoped Istanbul would offer a new beginning.

The transition was rocky but their situation was sink or swim. Sana said she came to Istanbul with only $10 in her pocket: "We didn't have enough money to ride the metro or drink chai," she said. Sana now works at a wedding planning company and Rusty works as an English teacher but both are technically employed illegally. His company even required Rusty to use a pseudonym and tell students he's American to get the job. He said most companies won't hire Syrians without work permits, no matter how qualified they are. "My passport is the only thing keeping me down," he said.

With a piercing on her eyebrow and died pink hair, Sana is now hardly recognizable from the timid, hijab wearing girl she was in Syria. Drinking beers in an Istanbul rock and roll Sana and Rusty are embracing the freedom of living in Istanbul. "Nobody judges you here," Sana said. In Turkey, Sana said there's more liberty than Syria but life is still far from normal. Living in Istanbul for two years, they still haven't been able to get residency, which means living without basic necessities like health care.

While the couple feels more free, legal restrictions prevent them from having the same freedom as permanent residents. Syrians without documentation are not the exception in Istanbul but increasingly the norm. After the refugee influx intensified, Turkey's system for processing asylum fell behind. As a result, a large percentage of Syrians in Istanbul are unregistered and not recognized by the government. This means even the most vulnerable refugees don't receive any benefits from the government.

[17] Dewan, Angela. "'Incontrovertible' evidence Sarin used in Syria, watchdog says." CNN. April 20, 2017. Web.

Sana and Rusty first started dating while attending university in Damascus. When the conflict started, Rusty fled Syria to avoid military service. Sana ran away from her family to meet him in Istanbul where the couple now works and rents a house together.

In a statement first issued in July 2016, Turkey's President Erdogan proposed a plan for granting Syrians citizenship which he echoed in a speech in the first week of 2017.[18] But the uncertainty of the plan's timeline perpetuates a theme of Turkey's infrastructure struggling to support refugee integration. In Turkey currently, refugees must the same process as other foreigners to apply for Turkish residency. This process requires a Turkish bank account with $6,000 U.S. dollars—something Rusty said is pushing people to remain illegal.

Wafaa, a 28 year-old-Kurdish refugee from Damascus, experienced the challenge of working illegally when she got a job with a Turkish travel agency after many months of struggling to help support her family. Despite graduating from Damascus University in Syria, without Turkish language or a work permit, her options in Istanbul were limited. The excitement of finding a job soon dissipated after Wafaa worked for a month without receiving any compensation. Realizing that she was being exploited, Wafaa left the job and now takes Turkish language classes trying to prepare for living in Turkey long term. For now, her family of seven living in Istanbul relies on money sent from family members in Germany and Syria and the single salary of her sister working illegally in a factory as a seamstress.

[18] Al Jazeera. "Erdogan offers citizenship to Syrian and Iraqi refugees." January 07, 2017. Web.

Wafaa came from Istanbul to Damascus with her family in Jan. 2016 while her father stayed behind in Damascus. Although they planned to travel on to Europe, they remain in Turkey where they continue to navigate the challenges of living undocumented.

In January 2016, The Turkish Confederation of Employers Association pushed the Turkish government to provide Syrians work permits to prevent companies gaining an advantage by hiring them as cheap labor. However, regulations require that only 10 percent of a company's workers can be Syrian. According to Human Rights Watch, the Turkish government issued 13,298 work permits in 2016 but there are between 600,000 and 1 million Syrians working in Turkey.[19] This number represents a small proportion of Syrians living and working in Turkish cities like Istanbul where Syrian workers continue to be exploited and underpaid by employers.

Permit laws require businesses to create contracts with their workers which many are reluctant to do. Syrian workers have proven to help boost Turkey's struggling economy yet they do not receive the same benefits as their Turkish counterparts. The long term implications of this unequal treatment creates barriers to integration as Syrians are framed as scapegoat for unemployment, declining trade and poor tourism.[20]

[19] Frelick, Bill. "Syrian Refugee Kids Still Out of School in Turkey." Human Rights Watch. January 24, 2017. Web.
[20] Benmayor, Gila."Economic effect of Syrian refugees in Turkey." Hürriyet Daily News. May 05, 2015. Web.

"What reminds us of our country is two things—food and music," says the owner of Salloura Sweets, a company from Aleppo famous for its Syrian desserts. The workers, including 14-year-old Hanan, say they couldn't find jobs when they came to Turkey until the company opened a branch in Istanbul.

Because of this, many Syrians are bound to jobs with manipulative employers without the possibility of moving into higher position. This has become a problem for young Syrians that are stuck working as a necessity for survival. Hanna, 14, now works full time in a factory producing Syrian sweets even though Turkey's legal working age is 15.

Meanwhile, Fatima, 11, remains at home where she sews dresses to make $3.50 for two days of work. She fled to Istanbul from from Aleppo with her family and works at home instead of attending school. Although her family is legally registered as refugees, they don't receive benefits from the government which makes Fatima's contributions more valuable than an education.

The continued struggle for survival for many refugees influenced by inadequate government support keeps a large number of other Syrian children also out of school as parents choose between educating their children and having enough money to support their families. In 2017, a UNICEF report found that over 40 percent of school aged Syrian children in Turkey are not

attending school.[21] The study finds a variety of reasons for this trend but for many, it comes down to living as refugees in a country without government support.

Fatima lives with seven family members in a small apartment after fleeing Aleppo when their home was bombed. With no men in her family to work, Fatima spends her time in Istanbul sewing dresses inside her home to help support her mother and siblings. She works on each dress for a month and says for two days labor she earns the equivalent of US $3.50.

That's the case for Ali, 11, who works full time in a Turkish owned grocery to support his family. He starts work early in the morning and finishing in the evening with only one short break for lunch. Sitting in the park during a rare moment off of work, he watches a group of Syrian children playing from afar. His sister is one of them. She's allowed to attend school but Ali shoulders the responsibility of a grown man to help his parents pay the rent. He's adapted quickly to his job by learning Turkish but quickly falls behind during the months he's missed from school. Fitting into the Turkish school system seems insignificant for his family that's still struggling to survive.

Despite the probability that most refugees will remain in Turkey for years, the lack of documentation prevents many Syrian children from enrolling in public schools. In Istanbul, this gave rise to Syrian schools that teach lessons in Arabic and provide an alternative for Syrian students to continue their studies. Can, a Syrian elementary school in Istanbul, initially started

[21]UNICEF. "Over 40 per cent of Syrian refugee children in Turkey missing out on education, despite massive increase in enrolment rates." January 19, 2017. Web.

with funding from charity organizations but now operates independently without funding from the Turkish government. Because of this, most children must pay to attend which is a major burden for most of the families in Okmeydani, a low-income neighborhood where the school operates.

Despite the financial burden, many parents send their children to Syrian schools because of language differences in Turkish schools and out of hope they'll maintain some connection to their homeland. Although Syrians schools apply for support from the ministry of education, they are denied funding. This means teachers in Syrian schools like Can get paid minimal wages while others teach without pay.

Can School was started as a charity project for Syrian children in Istanbul. Can is one of a growing network of Syrian schools opened in Istanbul because language barriers and discrimination make it difficult for children to attend Turkish schools.

As many refugees become more settled, there's a long term reality to the situation that's becoming increasingly apparent. Outside of public schools, integration of Syrian children is stunted by the separation and social removal from Turkish children. In the broader social context, Syrians of all ages are becoming a long-term facet of Turkish society but barriers for integration are dictated by international migration policies and lack of Turkish government support.

Attempting to address the situation, the European Union pledged the Emergency Social Safety Net program that provides cash transfers to refugees in Turkey as part of its humanitarian goal

for 2017. The program provides refugee families around 100 TL, around $35 per month distributed through the Turkish Red Crescent.[22] Whether or not that money will make it into the hands of those in need depends on a system that has proved difficult to trust. Especially for the vast majority of refugees who aren't registered as such, the promise of receiving money may just be another government challenge to navigate.

Syrians raise their voices against the actions of Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad at a protest in Istanbul's Aksaray neighborhood. The neighborhood has become an epicenter for refugee integration with Syrian restaurants and businesses.

As Syrians in Istanbul continue to adapt to their unexpected transition, the assumption of life in Turkey as temporary begins to fade away. For many of the men in Ali's hostel, this is a harsh reality and continued frustration. Gathered around the living room on ragged couches, the men pass around phones with pictures in uniform from when they were fighters in the Free Syrian Army.

Conversations swirl around about the possibilities of returning to Syria where they felt that they were fighting for a purpose. Without steady jobs or families keeping them in Turkey, some feel that they have nothing to lose, even if it means returning to brutal violence. Their longing to return home stands in biting contrast to their bitterness towards life in Turkey. Promises from the

[22] European Commission. "EU announces more projects under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey: €348 million in humanitarian aid to refugees in Turkey." European Commission Press Release Database. September 8, 2016. Web.

government about Turkish citizenship or EU financial support mean little. Because for them, nothing ever seems to change.

Meanwhile, Sana and Rusty have embraced their future in Istanbul where they're built a new life from resourcefulness. Even if conditions allowed them to return to Syria, Sana said they would choose to stay--a feeling shared by many Syrian young people who have settled in Istanbul. They only wish to live legally in a city in which they've invested so much. "I refuse to be called a refugee," Rusty said of his contributions. Poised to stay long term, he is still caught in a place of uncertainty about what his legal future holds. Not yet a resident but no longer a guest, like many other Syrians in Istanbul, he exists in the space in-between.

A protestor stands in Taksim square after a rally on Istiklal street against government continued oppression in Syria that makes the status for refugees outside their country uncertain.

Adapting Through Innovation

“Wahid, ithnaan, talatah…. yalla!” With a countdown in Arabic, the seven musicians break into the first song in their repertoire. A few coins trickle into the open guitar case in front of the group’s lively front man, Omer. Sporting an earring in the shape of a musical note, shaggy hair and an American Flag T-shirt, he strums along with gusto.

It’s a sticky July afternoon as the sun glares down on Istiklal, Istanbul’s busiest walking street. The band stands in front of a metal wall painted bright red and yellow with cartoon-like graffiti as the backdrop for their makeshift stage. The band’s Arabic lyrics mix with calls of Turkish vendors and babble of Europeans coolly strolling by with Starbucks and shopping bags. Tourists pause in front of the scene. Pulling out smartphones with colorful cases, they record snippets of the song on Snapchat before melding back into the natural flow of the boulevard.

Omer is 17 and the youngest out of his band that formed when they came to Istanbul as refugees from Syria. When he left his home in Aleppo in 2015, Omer brought two things: a small bag of clothes and his guitar. On the same guitar, he plays with a unbridled energy--fingers flying over the strings. Now this multigenerational crew of musicians is staking their claim in the city’s music scene

At 17 years old Omer started an independent life in Istanbul, going to school and working as a musician to pay rent for his own apartment. “Live a music life” is what Omer wants for his future in Istanbul.

Jamal the most senior-band member and pseudo father figure effortlessly blends the sound of his oud with Omer's quick flamenco style. Next to him on the right is Basel--smiling widely, he adds rhythm with calculated drum beats. To his left, Safi strums his guitar calmly in contrast to Omer's dynamic energy. A motley combination of university aged students and professional musicians, this slice of pavement isn't the kind of venue where they used to play in Syria.

Although Omer and his bandmates now bear the title of refugees, their innovation brings light to the city despite complicated circumstances. As the group gets to the bridge of their song, a crowd forms a crescent circle around them. Onlookers clap along to the band's rhythm and a few daring fans step forward to dance out front. International tourists clap along to the sounds of Syria but a few in the audience smile along—recognizing lyrics that tell of the country they've been forced to leave behind.

Despite challenges of assimilation, the Syrian spirit in Istanbul prevails. After a musical performance, a group of Syrian men clap along to lyrics that tell of the country they've been forced to leave behind. While some of the older men say they'd return to Syria if given a chance, most now think of Turkey as a permanent home.

Omer studied guitar in his hometown before violence in Aleppo readjusted his concept of childhood. Now the site of some of Syria's most brutal atrocities, Omer said war in Aleppo just became another feature of life. During an uncharacteristic serious conversation, he recalls calmly waking up in his home to the sound of a bomb and glass shattering from his window onto the foot of his bed. "Every day I'd come home and ask 'Dad, who died died today?' he said, "It's normal."

Although Omer escaped to Turkey unscathed, many still living in Aleppo, crisis is still a daily reality. In the West, tragic stories of the people who remain in the city have come to represent Syria's war. In November 2016, The United Nations said Eastern Aleppo was at the risk of becoming "one giant graveyard" through the onslaught of violence as the Syrian government fought to take control.[23] These images infiltrate the Western consciousness recording a hopeless humanitarian catastrophe.

Before the city became synonymous with scenes of crumbling buildings, blood, and bodies buried in rubble, Aleppo was a thriving business center and for Omer it was home."I miss my friends. I miss all the ones who are dead. I miss my family, my neighbors… my life there. But not the war," he said.. In contrast to the graphic scenes of trauma, stories like Omer and his bandmates' progress more slowly—daily becoming a larger part Istanbul's social fabric.

For refugees now living outside their country, life must go on. When their song ends, Omer spins his guitar and waves to the crowd. "Shukran—thank you!" he calls out. He gathers the bills in his guitar case and distributes it to the other six members of his band. Omer pulls out a cigarette as a couple of pre-teen girls giggle their way over for a hug and a selfie. "I'm famous," Omer says jokingly. But in his new Istanbul world, it's starting to be true

Abdurrahman also wouldn't have pictured fame when he came to Istanbul as a refugee. Like many other young men who arrived from Syria by themselves, Abdurrahman initially made barely enough money to survive. With only a refugee permit, Abdurrahman had few options except restaurant and factory jobs where he earned around $200 a month. He started performing magic tricks as a hobby when he came to Turkey from Syria four years ago but never thought to make it a profession.

After months working long hours with little pay, he decided to try out for nationally televised talent show program "Turkey's Got Talent" in hope of a different future. Practicing his tricks paid off—earning Abdurrahman a spot on the semi-final round of the show. "I started working in my dream and now my dreams came true," he said. For him, performing magic offered an alternative to the limits of working as a refugee.

Meeting Abdurrahman for the first time in an Istanbul café, he immediately pulls out a deck of cards and starts showing off his best tricks. A young fan in the cafe comes over to the table to request her favorite trick and claps with delight as he executes it effortlessly. In a YouTube video, he smiles from a stage in front of thousands as he shows off the same illusion with ease. On his Facebook fan page where he now has over 10,000 followers, Abdurrahman uploads videos from recent performances where more fans comment their support.

But Abdurrahman's photos smiling with friends in Istanbul exist in sharp contrast to how most people in the West perceive Syrian refugees. In the past six years, Western media has widely covered the refugee crisis and chronicled stories of individuals it affected. The media rightfully

[23] BBC News. "Syria war: Aleppo risks becoming giant graveyard - UN." November 30, 2016. Web.

documents the brutality of violence in Syria but with the pervasiveness of graphic images, necessary subtleties of refugee stories get pushed aside.

Abdurrahman started a new life in Istanbul with his magic tricks. His dedication payed off when he was chosen as the only Syrian finalist on the TV show "Turkey's Got Talent." With this success, he wants to work as a magician outside Turkey but can't because of limits on his Syrian passport.

News media coverage of carnage that continues to be a daily occurrence. With images of Syrians bleeding and dying, the issue continues to put sympathy at odds with politics and fear. Iconic photos like the Omran Daqneesh, a bloodied 5-year-old Syrian boy who was pulled from a building after an airstrike in Aleppo, showcase the terror of war.[24] These photos become seared into Western minds as a graphic reminder of suffering in a nation that for most, feels many degrees removed.

Rounds of UN peace talks have failed to produce concrete results as Syria's war continues to becomes more entrenched. In the United States and EU, there now exists a tense contrast between pity and resistance towards Syrian refugees. American involvement reached a new level in April 2017 when President Trump fired 59 missiles at a Syrian airbase in response President Bashar al-Assad's use of chemical weapons against his people.[25] The internal politics in many Western countries are laden with isolationism and Islamophobia despite humanitarian promises.

[24] Narayan, Chandrika. "Little boy in Aleppo a reminder of war's horror." CNN. August 18, 2016. Web.
[25] News, CBS. "Live Updates: Trump orders missile strike on Syria military targets." CBS News. April 06, 2017. Accessed May 09, 2017.

For many Syrians in Istanbul, this creates an added challenge for finding their place in the city. Abdurrahman is using his magic tricks to break this mold and connect with his new community. Pulling out a deck of cards on the metro, he kneels down to a young Turkish girl and asks her to pick one. Swifty shuffling and maneuvering the deck in his hands, the girl's face lights up as the card back to her. Engaging with his new home, Abdurrahman said he performers to help give Syrians a positive name in the city. "We came to here to just live in peace," he said

In many ways, his is a success stories But for Abdurrahman, fulfillment from practicing his craft does not mean life is free of challenges. Living in a crowded apartment with other Syrian men, he still has limited finances and struggles to make money working with his craft. With his newly achieved fame from Turkey's Got Talent, Abdurrahman hopes to perform internationally someday but for now he is bound by the travel restrictions of his Syrian passport.

Although his story isn't a black and white version of success, through innovation Abdurrahman continues to push the boundaries placed on him as a refugee. His is one of the many sides of refugee innovation have become a uniquely important side of the true immigration crisis. As the diaspora spreads farther from its origins, Syrians creatively adapt and engage with their new environments to create stories that are all their own.

"Istanbul is a city for fighters," Maisa Alhafez says of the resilience required for Syrians to survive in the city. Maisa came by herself alone to Turkey and works as a music teacher and director of a singing group. She named the group The Istanbul Mosaic Choir because she hopes mixing cultures can bring understanding about Syrians to Turkey.

With the melding of cultures the Syrian refugee crisis has created, a fusion emerges. For Maisa, a teacher who came to Turkey from Damascus in 2013, mixing cultures through music has allowed her to both maintain and share her Syrian culture. Maisa didn't plan to start a formal musical group when she posted on Facebook asking for singers to practice together. After coming to Istanbul by herself from Syria along, she was looking for likeminded people to share her love of music.

Two years later, a group of 10 choir members meets weekly under Maisa's direction in a room at the Church of St. Anthony. Maisa stands in front of the group and guides them through their songs with precise and animated movements. Adam, one of the choir's first members plays along with precision on his guitar as the singers sway in unison. Maisa is strict when critique the singers on their harmony but as the choir files into a cafe after practice after practice, she laughs along as just another member of the multinational group.

That was Maisa's goal when she started the choir. A combination of Syrians, Turkish and Syrian musicians she named it the Istanbul Mosaic Choir as a way to bring cultures together in her new Istanbul world. The members of the group sing songs in Kurdish, Persian, Turkish, Arabic and Greek and perform together in venues around the city where they're gaining increasing notoriety.

But Maisa said her life in Istanbul didn't always look like this. During a rare moment of calm, Maisa drinks a cup of coffee in her living room as she prepares to for the day and talks about the difficulties of her first months in the the city, when she felt the only negativity. Living apart from her family, Maisa said her brother in-law in Syria was kidnapped and killed. Far removed without a choice to return home, she struggled but adapted out of necessity. Her unhappiness nearly pushed her to make the risky trip to Europe by sea. She chose to focus on her life in Turkey instead.

Maisa is now a force to be reckoned with in Istanbul--constantly coordinating concerts, charity events and activities for her choir. Although life still has its ups and downs, Maisa feels new freedom in Istanbul because she's made the conscious effort not to be smothered by her circumstances. "Istanbul is a city for fighters," she said. From her experience, those who are resilient and innovative will find success.

During a Sunday barbeque in the park along the water, Maisa sits in a chair alongside a circle of her choir mates and friends. A young and vibrant Syrian community laughs and sings, united under unfortunate but now unavoidable circumstances. It's a community Maisa helped bring together. For this group, these moments make living in Istanbul worth the challenge.

Tragedy continues as Syria nears its sixth year of fighting, leaving cities deeply divided and forcing refugees to scramble for a new start. Syria drifts farther from a peaceful compromise and many refugees in Istanbul still struggle to cope with the loss of their homeland.

Ismaeel Tamr celebrates with his wife in Istanbul on their wedding night. He earns a living as a rapper and part of a growing group of young Syrian performers. He's part of a hopeful younger generation that's innovation is fueling success outside their homeland.

'These aren't the stories Omer talks about though, he's more worried about the future he's started for himself in Istanbul— one where he rents his own apartment and supports himself playing music in the street. After 10 hours of playing he returns to his small apartment and collapses onto the bed. "[It's] not easy okay, it's really hard," he said. But for Omer, it's all about keeping the music alive. "I play music to make people happy. I can't not be happy," he said.

The next afternoon he'll return to his spot on the street where locals wave as they pass and stop to shake his hand. As he opens his guitar case to collect contributions every afternoon, he invites the city to hear a piece of Syria. Without his sound, Istiklal street and Istanbul would now feel incomplete. In the same way, Abdurrahman's card tricks bridge a space of cultural uncertainty while Maisa's music pulls traditions together to make transition a little less challenging.

Because of innovation and resourcefulness, they have far defied rigid preconceptions about refugees. They are no longer guests but a valued pieces of Istanbul's culture. Like other Syrians around the world defying their circumstances, these people are far greater than a byproduct of crisis.

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Biography

Hailing from the mountainous land of Albuquerque, I came to UT with many interests but no clear direction. Turns out there's a major for that. During my time in Plan II, I've fully milked the travel grant funds to figure out how I learn best: through experience. As part of my international relations degree, I spent one summer travelling through the Indian Himalayas with a high maintenance albeit well meaning study abroad group. The experience was enough to convince me that I wanted to forge authentic experiences abroad independently. My experience in Turkey led me to journalism as way to turn my inherent restlessness into action. More importantly, it kept me constantly engaged and introduced me to people from whom I learned so much. I want to continue pursuing opportunities in journalism abroad to keep that fire alive. Only time will tell the rest.